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ABSTRACT

This research project was designed to help the faculty at a southwestern, urban elementary school better understand what parents thought about the school's alternative assessment methods and narrative reporting to communicate with parents. Assessment methods were defined as the ways teachers learn about students' understandings, and communication methods were defined as narrative reports by teachers; parents did not make this distinction. With few exceptions, when parents used the term assessment, they were referring to the narrative reports they received. Subjects were 192 parents who responded to a questionnaire on their perceptions of assessment methods and the narrative reports. Results indicated that parents were generally pleased with the detail of the narrative reports. They believed they were receiving more information about their children than they ever had with any other reporting system, but were unsure about the specific methods being used to assess their children's progress, and could not always determine from the narrative reports how well their children were performing. Some parents wanted more information about children's ranks, grade levels in class, and a specific test performance on national college admissions tests. As a result of the study and based on their teaching experiences, the faculty at the subject school scheduled more frequent parent conferences, drafted grade-level standards, and developed "exemplar booklets," which provide student work samples demonstrating varying levels of achievement for each standard. (WP)

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WHAT PARENTS THINK ABOUT ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENT AND NARRATIVE REPORTING: ONE SCHOOL'S FINDINGS

by Deborah Diffily, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

It is important that teachers help parents understand both the methods they are using to assess students and the reporting system they are using to communicate what they know about students. This research project was designed to help the faculty at Carrington Center better understand what parents thought about both of these issues.

Teachers at Carrington view assessment methods as the ways they learn about students' understandings and they define narrative reports as the way they communicate this information about students to parents. Parents at Carrington did not make this distinction. With few exceptions, when parents use the term assessment, they are referring to the narrative reports they receive.

A few parents were concerned about not understanding the new methods of alternative assessment, but most of the families at Carrington wanted to leave that issue in the hands of the teachers, the people they viewed as the professionals.

Parents were generally pleased with the detail of the narrative reports. They believe they were receiving more information about their children than they ever had with any other reporting system. They also believed that they could more easily understand their children's strengths and weaknesses through this type of reporting. However, parents were still somewhat confused as to "where their children were." Some wanted more information about how their child ranked within the classroom. Some wanted to know how their child compared to grade level expectations. Still others wanted to know how children performing at their current levels would perform on national college admissions tests.

Although some parents still have reservations about alternative assessment and narrative reporting, they believe that they children are receiving better educations in this restructured school than they would in a more traditional school.

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What Parents Think about Alternative Assessment and Narrative Reporting: One School's Findings

The educational reform movement of the past decade has focused national attention on assessment in American schools. Calls for reform and increased accountability have placed assessment at the forefront of the education agenda. While some educators have increased standardized testing in an effort to satisfy the call for increased accountability (Medina & Neill, 1990), other educators are investigating more authentic ways of assessing student progress and children's capabilities. Researchers and professional organizations are strongly encouraging teachers to use a variety of authentic assessment methods (Seeley, 1994). These newer method of assessment is taking many forms: portfolios, performance-based tasks, journals, exhibits, investigations, demonstrations, and written or oral presentations (Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992).

With the change in assessment methods comes the issue of reporting students' progress/abilities to their families. Some school districts still require letter or numerical grades. Teachers in these districts are struggling with the issue of translating information learned from authentic assessment methods into the mandated grades (Seeley, 1994). In other districts, teachers work with principals and parents to develop reports based on rubrics or levels of outcomes (Claridge & Whitaker, 1994; Sperling, 1994). Still other teachers are working to create narrative reports to describe students behaviors (Horm-Wingerd, 1992; Taylor, 1990). Despite the format of the reporting mechanisms, these reports are being created for the families of students to help the adults understand how their children are performing and progressing in school. As educators, we must work to ensure that our reports communicate

PS 022887

effectively to parents. In his overview of a recent volume of *Educational Leadership,* Ron Brandt (1994, p. 3) commented that "reporting has always been troublesome for educators. What teachers think is important may not be what parents what to know."

This research project was initiated to examine that very issue. The faculty of one school, in a large urban school district in the Southwest, uses many forms of alternative assessment and chooses to report to families through conferences and narrative reports. This research project looked at parental perceptions of alternative assessment and narrative reporting.

THE SCHOOL

Carrington Center (a pseudonym) was established in 1992 with the express purpose of challenging traditional assumptions about education. It is a public school working within an independent school district comprised of 67 elementary schools, 21 middle schools, and 12 high schools. All individuals associated with the school, administrators, teachers, parents and students, chose to come to Carrington. Currently 360 students are enrolled in grades kindergarten through fifth, with an ethnic population of 40% Anglo, 32% African American, 26% Hispanic, and 2% Asian. In the past two years, the faculty has examined many aspects of education and continues to search for more effective ways of working with students and their families.

Among educational issues that continue to be examined at Carrington are alternative ways to assess the progress of individual students and ways of reporting this progress to family members. Currently faculty members carefully observe student behaviors and document these observations through anecdotal records. Teachers

systemically collect student work samples and analyze these for growth and areas which need to be strengthened. Students and teachers work together to develop rubrics to use in scoring products, such as response journals, brochures, video taped presentations, and games. On-demand tasks are developed by faculty and administered to entire classes to determine comparative abilities in math, science, reading, and writing. Information gathered from all these sources are used to communicate student progress to family members during conferences and through narrative reports.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data collection for this project took place in two stages. The first method of data collection was a questionnaire, designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The second method of data collection was interviews with selected parents. Parents were interviewed on the basis of volunteering for this portion of the research. All parents who were selected indicated an interest in being interviewed through their answer to the final question on the questionnaire. Twenty parents were interviewed individually. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed with the resulting qualitative data analyzed using the modified analytic induction method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed by the primary researcher with the assistance of two secondary researchers, also teachers at Alice Carrington, to ensure the trustworthiness of the data.

QUESTIONNAIRE

The research was initiated with the distribution of a questionnaire comprised of 20 statements and three open-ended questions to all first grade families as a pilot. A factor analysis was conducted for the twenty items. The reliability coefficient alpha for the entire instrument was .79. Based on this reliability, the questionnaire was then distributed to all families (N=297) at the school. Two follow-up distributions for nonrespondents yielded a total response of 192 completed questionnaires, 65% response.

SUBJECTS

Of the 192 respondents, 37 (19.3%) were male and 155 (80.7%) were female. Reporting ages by approximate quartiles, 22.9% were between 23 and 32; 23.5% were between 33 and 36; 29.1% were between 37 and 40, and 24.5% were between 41 and 68. Four respondents had 4 children attending the school; three had 3 children attending; 48 had 2 children, and 137 had only one child in Carrington.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The project began with a global question regarding parental perceptions of alternative assessment and narrative reporting. As the research proceeded, the final research questions became:

1. How well do parents understand the assessment methods being used in the classrooms?
2. How comfortable are parents with narrative reporting?
3. What are parents' concerns about Carrington?

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Understanding of Assessment Methods

The majority of the parents at Carrington believe they understand the assessment methods that teachers use in the classroom. In response to a question regarding how well they understood the evaluation of students, 107 (55.7%) responded that they felt they understood Carrington's assessment methods very well. Seventy-four (38.5%) responded that they somewhat understood the assessment methods. Only 11 (5.7%) indicated they did not understand the assessment methods very well.

This response indicates that most parents feel as if they understand assessment methods used in the school; however, in written responses to open-ended questions, very few parents mentioned specific methods used in Carrington classrooms. Only 17 (9%) parents mentioned anything about specific assessment methods used at the school. Twelve of those referred to the self-assessment done by students. In response to items on the questionnaire, 69.8% of parents were unsure or felt they did not have enough information to respond to the statement that "rubrics are a good way to evaluate student work," and 35.9% answered similarly to the statement that "on-demand tasks are useful in evaluating student progress." In the interviews, the pattern held true of being unclear about specific assessment methods such as rubrics, on-demand tasks, and other specific methods of assessing children.

One possible explanation for this discrepancy in how parents feel they understand the assessment methods and their actual understanding of specific assessment methods is in the definition of terms. Teachers at the school view

assessment methods as the ways they learn about students' understandings and they define narrative reports as the way they communicate this information about students to parents. Parents appear to view the two separate issues as one. In response to an open-ended question on the questionnaire, "What do you see as the main strengths of Carrington's use of alternative assessment methods and narrative reports?," almost all of the responses referenced only the narrative report. One parent wrote, "The main strength of Carrington's use of alternative assessment methods comes from the fact that it gives the parents more information about their child's learning and ability than the traditional reports cards do. It allows the parents to know what their child is capable of, not just whether or not the child is progressing." This parent was obviously referring to the narrative reports, not the assessment methods used to evaluate students.

Another explanation for this apparent discrepancy is that many of those interviewed indicated that they did not feel it was necessary that they understood exactly how the teachers assessed students. One parent commented about the school's participation in the New Standards Project, "I don't know what the standards would be or the scoring mechanism, but then I'm not supposed to. I'm not the professional here." This opinion that teachers should be responsible for choosing the assessment methods and interpreting what they learn from those assessments was held by many parents.

Still another explanation for the difference between what parents feel and what they know about assessment may be their own confusion about how students should be assessed. In responding to the statement, "Students should be evaluated in terms of growth in comparison to their previous work," 175 (91.1%) parents either agreed or

strongly agreed. Yet, 81 (42.2%) parents indicated they believed that students should be compared to other students in their grade level, but only 33 (17.2%) agreed that students should be evaluated in comparison to a grade level standard.

Though the vast majority of parents do not feel the necessity of understanding the specific assessment methods used at the school, some parents do . One parent commented in an interview, "I do want to know where she is against the very best, not the average TAAS rated student, and I am trying to find that anchor. What is a 1300 SAT student doing today?" While some parents do feel strongly about wanting to know much more about Carrington's assessment methods, this opinion is held by a very small group of parents.

Beliefs about Narrative Reports

Most parents (80.8%) believe that narrative reports give more information about their child than traditional report cards according to their response on one questionnaire item. This opinion was confirm in their written responses to the open-ended questions Forty-three parents (22%) specifically commented on the fact that narrative reports provided much more detailed information about their children than any other educational reporting system they had seen. Referring to the narrative report, one parent wrote, "They are much more informative than the regular report card. Instead of a specific grade, it gives a detailed report of your child's progress in specific areas." Another parent wrote, "A tremendous amount of information is given to parents about their child through the written evaluation and teacher conferences." Still another wrote, "The main strength is I know what he is learning, how he learns, and why he is learning - which tells me much more than letter grades."

Thirty-six (19%) parents mentioned being better able to see their child's specific strengths and weaknesses. The following comments are representative of those parents: "It gives a better picture of the students strengths and weaknesses. A letter or number grade is too simplistic in evaluating the complexity of learning," "It gives a very detailed description of what your child is doing well on and also what specifically he or she can improve or work on." Another parent wrote:

> We know much more about our daughter's actual abilities. We are aware of the skills she has mastered and the areas where she needs additional attention. The way specific information and suggestions about ways in which we may extend learning at home are very helpful.

Only one parent wrote a negative response to this question about narrative reporting:

> I do not see strengths in the method. Because there are no grades to work for and earn, the students are less motivated. They do not have to do any hard work if they do not want to because the teacher doesn't grade it.

It is interesting to note that in parents' written comments and in their remarks during the interview they were very positive about the detail of the narrative reports; however, only 15 parents (7.8%) chose narrative reports as the way they learned the most about their child's educational progress. Sixty-three parents (32.8%) indicated that conversations with the teachers provided the most information; 9 (4.7%) indicated that conversations with their children provided more information, and 19 (9.9%) chose

reviewing their children's portfolios. Almost half (86 - 44.8%) of those completing the questionnaire chose a combination of the four methods. When pressed in interviews to select only one of the four methods, almost all parents said that conversations with teachers gave them more information about their child's educational progress.

Parental Concerns

Although the questionnaire specifically posed questions about alternative assessment and narrative reporting, parents used the questionnaire as a forum to express concerns they had about the school. Three categories emerged from the qualitative data: concerns about whether the "basics" were being covered in their children's classrooms, how their children would react to if they were to return to a traditional school, and the issue of comparing students.

Many parents were accustomed to seeing student work on a daily basis when their children were attending more traditional schools. At Carrington, much of the student work is kept at school in work-in-progress folders, learning logs, and project binders. This may explain parental comments such as: "It is not always clear to us about exactly what our kids are learning." or "Are they learning all that a student at that level needs to know?" Like these two comments, most concerns about what children were learning at school were very general. Parents typically want the best for their children, but do not always know what that is. One parent said:

> I am still not sure that I know he is doing what he needs to be doing. I don't know that I'll know or how I am supposed to find out. There are parents that don't expect enough and there are parents that expect too

much. I don't want to be that, but with your own child, you cannot be objective.

Some parents made very specific suggestions for Carrington teachers. One suggested that teachers "analyze what concepts should be mastered at each grade level and have a 'desired mastery level' for math, reading skills, spelling, English/grammar, geography, science and history." Several suggested that Carrington teachers should focus on reading, science, and mathematics.

Because the educational experience is different from traditional schools, some parents are concerned about how their children would react if they had to transfer to a different school. One parent wrote, " What impact will this have if my child transfers to a more conventional location?" Another commented:

> My biggest concern about the way Alice Carrington evaluates children is that when children go on to other educational facilities they will be unprepared for traditional methods and testing. Unfortunately I don't see testing, such as the SAT, going away anytime soon.

The issue of moving from a restructured school such as Carrington to a more traditional school seems to raise two primary concerns for parents. They wonder how their children will react to the difference in classroom structure and curriculum and they want to know how more traditional schools will interpret their children's narrative reports.

Still other parents are concerned about the issue of comparison of students. Some are concerned about how their child is doing compared to others in the classroom. Some are concerned about how their child is doing compared to grade level expectations. Others are concerned about about their child's ability to compete in college admission competition. These concerns were evident in some of the questions they posed in response to one of the open-ended questions on the questionnaire:

- How am I to tell if my child is working at a normal grade level compared to other schools?
- Is he on target with other standards for first grade?
- How do they measure compared to other students in this grade level nationally?
- How will this effect my children as they move on to junior high and high school?
- Will these reports be acceptable for college admission?
- How will my son rank when compared with other more traditional schools especially when college entrance exams are done?

Many of these questions, especially concerning predicting future results, can not be answered at this time with empirical research. However, the faculty strongly believes the way they facilitate student learning will produce stronger students and continue to talk with parents about their beliefs.

Not all parents were not concerned with the issue of comparison. One parent wrote, "I like the way that children are evaluated on their strengths and weaknesses. I

don't believe that elementary children need to be compared to others." Another commented, "I don't want to know where my son ranks in his class. I've never like ranking. I don't like comparison. There is absolutely no reason to do that." Another parent was even more emphatic, "I've seen the horror of what competitiveness does and the pressure you have to put on kids to make a certain grade and to me, the grades are just too subjective.

In a few written comments and in several of the interviews, parents indicated that much of their discomfort with the narrative reporting was based on the fact that they grew up with standardized testing and letter grades on report cards. While many admit that the letter grades did not tell them very much about their child's abilities or progress, they did find comfort in seeing A's on report cards. Several parents suggested combining the narrative reporting with letter grades. However, in interviews, parents seemed to feel comfortable with the concept of establishing grade level standards and comparing children to those standards instead of grading or comparing children to children.

SUMMARY

The clearest implication is that the work of this faculty regarding alternative assessment and narrative reporting is not complete. The vast majority of parents are pleased with the educational experiences their children are receiving at Carrington, yet as a group, they are unsure about the specific methods being used to assess their children's progress and cannot always determine from the narrative report how well their children are doing in school. While the faculty at Alice Carrington Applied Learning Center has spent many hours discussing the issues of assessment and reporting to parents, this work must continue. Working with parents and

administrators, the faculty must continue their efforts to inform parents about specific assessment methods being used in classrooms and to construct reports that communicate student abilities and progress more clearly. One parent suggested that the Carrington faculty should, "educate the parents with solid reasons that they can remember on why things are done the way they are. Sound logical reasoning as to why things are done they way they are would help alleviate some of the anxiety."

NOTE TO THE READER

As a result of this research project and from their personal experiences of working at Carrington for two years, the faculty decided to schedule more conferences with parents for the 1994-95 academic year. They have also drafted grade level standards and are working on "exemplar booklets" which will provide student work samples which demonstrate varying levels of each standard.

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